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THE PLEASURE OF FAMILIAR PLAYS

In the May number of the REVIEW, Mr. Firkin's adroitly named article—"The Source of Pleasure in Familiar Plays"—seems to me to have missed the point even more signally than Mr. Archer's contention in his book, *Play-making: A Manual of Craftsmanship*, in which he "draws a sharp distinction between curiosity which pursues the unknown and dramatic interest 'which survives when curiosity is dead.'"

EVERY observer of the drama will, I am sure, agree that some part of the delight we feel in witnessing a familiar play consists in the perception of subtle points of craftsmanship which have hitherto eluded notice; in welcoming old friends and old jokes with hospitable indulgence; even in "a curiosity dependent on the fiction of ignorance" with which we deceive ourselves as the dramatic narrative follows its well-worn course. Yet such diversions have no power to revive a mediocre piece. No play is as dead as the reigning success of last year or the year before. And it may be doubted whether they quite explain the spell which the classics have exerted on mankind through so many centuries. Is it nothing more than Shakespeare's technical skill which has invested Rosalind with perennial youth and beauty? Is it only "a curiosity dependent upon the fiction of ignorance" which has made Hamlet the supreme delight of every succeeding generation?

Personally I find Mr. Archer's "original" suggestion far more to the point. He recognizes a deeper pleasure in the "foreknowledge" one enjoys when witnessing a well-known play. "Our seat in the theater is like a seat on the Epicurean Olympus" which enables us to "taste for the moment the glory of omniscience." This is also, perhaps, a too trivial explanation of our unquenchable delight in the classics; yet to my mind it is a sound half-truth which carries one a long way forward.

Far from being new, however, the idea is familiar to the least analytical, the most empirical, man of the theater. And it is applied to new plays quite as confidently as to old. The late Frank Mayo used to warn aspiring dramatists against leaving the audience in doubt, even for a moment, as to any important detail regarding a character or situation; and he illustrated the point (with a conviction which perhaps surpassed his modesty) by citing the treatment of the finger-prints in his dramatization of "Pudd'nhead Wilson." From the outset the plot was foreshadowed; all that remained unknown was the *manner* of its development. In very similar terms Mr. Wilton Lackaye has lauded the skill with which, in the dramatization of "Trilby," the audience is shown the nature and potency of Svengali's hypnotic spells, and told how he intends to use them against the heroine. Even Mr. Archer's figures of speech have been anticipated, though crudely. Mr. Mayo used to say, and no doubt many a man before him: "People in the play may be fooled to the top of their bent; but an audience must be like God—it must know everything."

The same principle is illustrated in the fact, frequently commented on in the world of the theater, that no "mystery story" has been successfully dramatized. A novelist may introduce us into the thick of an unsolved murder, and keep us guessing, through several hundreds of

breathless pages, as to which of the varied characters is the criminal. If the leading figure can be successfully involved in mystery, the result is especially effective. This sort of story is occasionally elevated to the dignity of literature, as in certain of the tales of Edgar Allen Poe. On the stage, as far as I know, it does not even make good melodrama. From the outset the audience requires to know which is the hero and which the villain; and it requires, furthermore, to feel always assured that, however dark the hour may be, in the end the hero will triumph and the villain be crushed. In certain popular melodramas, as Mr. Archer himself has somewhere observed, this principle is deemed so important that the hero is shown triumphant at the end of each and every act.

In artistic drama, even in high comedy and tragedy, a similar principle obtains, though it is veiled beneath a subtler simulation of the complex texture of actual life. In every character virtues modulate into their cognate vices, qualities into their defects. Yet the sympathetic mind is never for a moment at a loss as to which side in the dramatic conflict is the side of the angels—and of the author. Othello is jealous, but the great gods love him. Hamlet is weak—but he is Shakespeare. Even as they die, we rejoice in them.

Here I am reminded of another of those managerial rules of thumb, so crudely phrased, and so firmly based on experience: "It isn't enough to let your audience know everything, like God; you've got to make it get right up on the stage with your hero—hold him back from doing the wrong thing, and push him on to do the right one. In every good play the audience is the chief actor." This saying, I take it, carries us a step beyond Mr. Archer's analysis. His gods are Epicurean; they have no touch of the gods of Æschylus, no touch of Jehovah. For the moment he ignores the fact that wherever the drama rises to the heights it is a vital, propulsive force in human existence.

In brief, the well-springs of dramatic art minister to the thirst of the human soul. We have all of us hopes and desires far beyond the possibilities of life to realize. Who would care to see Shakespeare acted if he could himself for the time in his own person, be Hamlet or Rosalind? What good citizen of Athens would have frequented the theater if his life offered him scope for the heroism of Prometheus or of Alcestis? In our narrow lives from day to day a thousand large impulses are thwarted, a thousand aspirations quenched. But under the spell of great art they are realized—if only in imagination, and for a moment.

With this quenchless thirst of the spirit all graceful Epicurean delights have nothing to do—the stimulation of an idle curiosity by means of the minor arts of suspense and surprise; the mazes of a well-exploited mystery; even a flawless artistry in legitimate technique. Such delights may amuse our leisure; but once known, they are as empty of real interest as last year's nests. If the drama has small place for them it is because, even in its humbler forms, it is at once the largest and the most concentrated of arts. It has been well said—and by Mr. Archer, among others—that no theme is worthy of the stage unless it centers in a struggle for something greater than any mere question of life and death. The protagonist in the drama is the immortal spirit; and what it demands in the theater is to feel not only omniscience

but omnipotence. No trick or concealment is tolerable which holds us from spreading our wings, and no play is ever stale which lures to the loftier flights.

JOHN CORBIN.

WHAT IS SOCIALISM?

A REJOINDER TO SOME CRITICISMS.

THE articles recently appearing in this REVIEW under the general title of "What is Socialism?" brought numerous letters to the Editor and the writer. This correspondence is of significance for at least three reasons.

First, almost without exception, the REVIEW's correspondents were Socialists. Here and there was a letter from the opposing camp, but these were few. From this I draw the conclusion—strongly impressed upon me before but now reinforced—that while the supporters of the revolutionary movement are active in carrying on their campaign its opponents are indifferent to the dangers facing them. This attitude explains the enormous strides Socialism is making. The Socialist is tireless. He is an omnivorous reader. In the reading-rooms it is the Socialist who is devouring the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW and similar American and foreign publications, earnestly studying what the opponents or supporters of Socialism write, always ready to join the issue, giving circulation by word of mouth to every argument or plea that will advance his cause. Socialist literature and Socialist speakers spread the doctrine, but little if any attempt is made to rebut or to reach the dissatisfied on the border-line willing to listen to reason if properly presented, who join the ranks of the revolutionists because they hear only one side.

Second.—These letters breathe conviction. Whether we believe Socialism is right or wrong, it is evident that to the Socialist his cause is just. He does not question; he knows. It is that profound confidence in the righteousness of the cause he has espoused that makes Socialism the vital—and dangerous—thing it is and constitutes the menace to society. The sincerity of the Socialist is as striking as the indifference of his opponent, whose courage may be no less, but who is content to oppose a resolute advance by wilfully closing his eyes.

Third.—These letters show that Socialism is confined to no one class or profession, that it has wiped out sectionalism and broken down the artificial boundaries of geographers. One is not surprised to receive a letter supporting Socialism from that hotbed of lawlessness Los Angeles, but it is somewhat bewildering that a man writing from Wall Street (who is courageous enough to give his name and his office-building) should avow his belief. New Ulm (Minnesota), Washington, Nashville, Seattle, great centers as well as places having only a local fame, are represented in the correspondence; clergymen, newspaper writers, workingmen, lawyers, and men whose occupations or professions are unclassified, have read these articles and thought proper to expose the fallacies of the author.

I said in one of my articles that the reason Socialism had obtained such a hold was the belief of its votaries, nearly always sincere and very